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SNIE 2-6-61  
19 October 1961\*

SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

PROBABLE SOVIET AND OTHER REACTIONS  
TO CERTAIN US MILITARY MEASURES  
IN THE BERLIN CRISIS

NO FORN DISSEMINATION  
EXCEPT TO SELECTED  
ALLIED COUNTRIES  
FROM 12/1/61

- Reactions to US Selective Use of Nuclear Weapons
  - Soviet Reactions
  - NATO Reactions
  - Reactions in Other Countries
- Reactions to Different Types of Selective Use

NOTE: This is the final version of the estimate.  
An additional printed text will not be circulated.

\*Dissemination of this estimate was delayed pending  
coordination of prefatory NOTE. This action was  
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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C E N T R A L   I N T E L L I G E N C E   A G E N C Y

19 October 1961

SUBJECT: SNIE 2-6-61: PROBABLE SOVIET AND OTHER REACTIONS TO CERTAIN  
US MILITARY MEASURES IN THE BERLIN CRISIS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate how the USSR would interpret and react to certain selective uses of nuclear weapons by the US at a given stage of the Berlin crisis, as well as the reactions of NATO members, other US allies, and the uncommitted countries to the same US actions.

ASSUMPTIONS

It is assumed for purposes of this estimate that the German Democratic Republic (GDR) has denied access to West Berlin, that the US and its allies have taken forceful measures to restore access, and that these actions have led to direct but small-scale and non-nuclear conflict between Soviet and US ground and air forces. In these circumstances, we examine reactions to certain selective uses

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of nuclear weapons by the US, ranging from those which are purely demonstrative, through those which include some destruction but have little or no military significance, to those which do destroy significant Soviet military capabilities but are still short of all-out strategic attack.

NOTE

Readers are cautioned that this estimate deals only with likely reactions to certain possible US courses of action postulated in a specific request submitted to the USIB. It does not purport to deal with the whole range of possible US options with regard to the selective use of nuclear weapons in connection with the Berlin crisis, nor does it deal with the likelihood that, given the Soviet assessment of the present balance of strategic capabilities, the USSR would allow the crisis to develop in the manner specified in the assumptions.<sup>1/</sup>

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1/ The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, wishes to state the following:

This estimate responds directly to the specifically postulated situations. He feels constrained, however, to note that, taken in their totality, the "Cases" examined tend to convey a sense of comprehensiveness unwarranted in view of the wide range of nuclear actions open to the US in connection with the Berlin

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crisis, actions which would be more meaningful in terms of the desired effect on the Soviets than at least some of those chosen to be examined in this paper. The over-all impact of an estimate addressing itself to these options would be markedly different if US applications of nuclear power were made in militarily more useful though still restricted ways. At any event, the estimate would be decidedly more valuable if it were permitted to convey a sense of the sequence in which various US actions were undertaken and some sense of the over-all political moves accompanying the military actions.

Finally, the estimate suffers from being forced to examine the effects of US nuclear actions in the postulated circumstances of a small-scale, nonnuclear war between US and Soviet air and ground forces. In the event the West seeks to maintain access to Berlin by military means the option to resist and the forces to employ will be open to the Soviets. The chosen condition -- i.e., Soviet forces opposing US forces -- has pre-empted much of the analysis which would otherwise have been made regarding the initial commitment of Soviet forces. More specifically, the full effect of the Soviet assessment of comparative nuclear capabilities -- as it would operate to restrict the initial commitment of Soviet forces -- has been sidestepped.

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THE ESTIMATE

I. THE SITUATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

1. Before proceeding to the estimate called for in the problem, it is useful to examine the situation envisaged by the assumptions, and to consider some of its implications. The GDR "has denied access to West Berlin." Both the USSR and the GDR, however, have up to the present time frequently and emphatically declared that they do not intend to deny access to Berlin, and for many reasons we think it unlikely that the GDR would have done so by a flat proclamation and enforcement of blockade. It is much more probable that the GDR would have announced various requirements and conditions of access which the US and its allies declared to be unacceptable and therefore considered to be tantamount to a denial. Whatever these requirements and conditions were, they were, by the terms of our problem, sufficiently drastic to persuade not only the US, but its allies as well, that essential interests were being attacked, and that at least small-scale military action to reopen access was necessary.

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2. It also appears that this small-scale military action has not persuaded the Soviets to give indications of willingness to compromise -- sufficient indications, at any rate, to convince the US and its allies that their most essential points would be granted. Possibly the Soviets made an initial miscalculation. They may have expected that the West would give in without undertaking any military measures, and, having discovered their error, found themselves unable to disengage readily. Or they may have decided that some degree of military conflict was acceptable, perhaps even desirable in order to magnify the impact of the reverse they were still determined to inflict upon the West. In any case, the situation envisaged in the problem and its assumptions presents the Soviets as prepared to run further and greater risks before withdrawing.

3. It follows that the US measures discussed in this paper would occur in a situation in which the military forces of both the US and the USSR were in a high state of readiness. With each side aware of the other's readiness, the pressures for rapid evaluation and action would be high. This means that decisions to undertake new military moves, including those based on a misinterpretation of the opponent's intentions, might be implemented quite rapidly.

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4. The rest of the world, meanwhile, would be exerting the most strenuous pressures upon both contestants to stop the fighting and to find a peaceful solution. The UN would almost certainly have taken cognizance of the situation. Various opportunities for communication and mediation would be available -- indeed would be vigorously urged upon the contestants. This means, we think, that, although both the USSR and the US would be heavily engaged by this stage, neither would be obliged to ask publicly for terms in humiliating circumstances if it wished to compromise. If the time came when both sides were prepared to give a little, ways would probably be at hand to stop the fighting, if the escalation had not gone too far.

II. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The USSR

5. Having assumed that the Soviets let the Berlin crisis come to actual fighting, we cannot exclude the possibility that this reflects a Soviet decision to make no relaxation whatever in their demands and to accept whatever risks this might involve. We still think it much more likely, however, that even in these circumstances the Soviets would expect to avoid general war by retreating somewhat from the positions they had taken with respect to Berlin, and that they would expect the West to do likewise.

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6. In interpreting any selective use of nuclear weapons by the US, the Soviets would therefore assess this action primarily as an indication of how far the US was willing to go in the further enlargement of hostilities. If they had to raise their estimate on this matter, we believe that they would wish to halt the process of escalation. At the same time, however, they would be anxious not to leave the impression that they themselves lacked the will to make a nuclear response. They would not want it to appear that the US, by demonstrating its will to use nuclear weapons, could intimidate the USSR and force a settlement on its own terms. They would regard such an outcome as disastrous to their standing as a great power and gravely prejudicial to their future policies. Accordingly, we believe that, in most circumstances, they would reply to US use of nuclear weapons by using them in return in some comparable manner.

7. Yet the Soviet interpretation of the US act, and its reaction to it, would in most cases depend to a very great degree upon the whole context of circumstances. It would be affected by the Soviet assessment of US public opinion, world opinion, the situation in the UN, the progress of fighting in East Germany, the firmness of the NATO Alliance, the attitude and intentions of Communist China, and so on. Possible but unpredictable events such as a revolt in East Germany would have profound impact. Whether any of the postulated US actions would persuade

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the Soviets to take steps for a reopening of negotiations would also depend greatly on just how far apart the positions of the two sides were when the military action was joined in East Germany.

8. In any event, the USSR would maintain a posture of resolution but at the same time seek to appear, throughout the crisis, as the champion of a negotiated settlement. It would wish to emerge from the conflict, not only as a strong and unintimidated power, but also in a position to claim that it had "saved the peace by the responsible use of its superior strength." Thus, in addition to proposing terms of its own, it would probably try to appear responsive to the initiatives put forth by third parties.

9. The foregoing considerations apply primarily to cases in which the US uses nuclear weapons more for demonstrative effect than for military purposes. The latter type of case would raise broader issues, which are considered in paragraphs 21-25.

The NATO Countries

10. Even though the GDR's conditions of Berlin access had been so onerous as to persuade the UK and France to join the US in military action, we believe that a number of NATO members would have opposed this course. Even among those countries which agreed that the challenge

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required a military response, none would regard the technical issues of access as worth general war; their agreement would almost certainly have stemmed from the conviction that broader issues of Europe's political future were involved. We think that, with NATO agreeing only reluctantly and incompletely to an initial use of conventional force, the general tendency in the alliance thereafter would be to limit the scope of hostilities at every stage.

11. In these circumstances, and particularly as the USSR laid increasing stress upon its nuclear capabilities against Western Europe, we believe that with the Berlin crisis at the stage of actual hostilities, NATO pressures for an early resort to negotiations would increase. France would probably join in this effort, dropping its present reserve toward negotiations, which is based upon de Gaulle's estimate that the Soviets, if confronted with sufficient firmness, will not allow matters to proceed to the point of hostilities. Since at the same time the USSR would be indicating a willingness to negotiate, probably on terms which did not appear to require the West to abandon its entire Berlin position, most NATO members would seek to dissuade the US from using nuclear weapons.

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Other US Allies

12. Most of the allies of the West in the rest of the world have comparatively little interest in the intricacies of the Berlin crisis as such, and are concerned primarily that it should not distract American attention from their own needs and weaken the prestige of their protector. At the same time, none of them sees anything to be gained from a war over Berlin in which they might be engulfed, and, as the risk of general conflict appeared to be increasing, they, too, would press hard for negotiations. Some, acutely conscious of Khrushchev's repeated threats and the pressure of public opinion at home, might seek to deny the US the use of military bases or facilities.

The Nonaligned Countries

13. For the uncommitted states the only important aspect of the Berlin question is whether there will be war or peace. If the West were to initiate the use of force by conventional methods and then introduce nuclear weapons into the conflict over Berlin, most of the uncommitted nations would make frantic efforts to bring about negotiation and compromise. The leaders of the uncommitted nations would attempt to organize their diplomatic resources and to rally world public opinion to persuade the great powers to draw back from general war. If there were time, some of them would try to organize general strikes,

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boycotts, massive peace marches, and denial, where possible, of land, water, and air routes to the great powers.

14. Because the US would have been the first user of nuclear weapons, and particularly because many leaders of uncommitted nations believe that the US is more easily influenced than the Soviet Union, most of the persuasive efforts of the uncommitted world would be directed toward the US. However, it is likely that from the beginning attempts would be also made to persuade the Soviet leaders to save the world by withholding retaliation and agreeing to negotiate.

III. ASSUMED ALTERNATIVE CASES

CASE A: The US uses nuclear weapons in a purely demonstrative way, e.g., it conducts a nuclear test in the atmosphere, or it tests missiles with live warheads, announcing that it is checking out advanced weapons.

15. The USSR almost certainly would not react by altering its estimate of US willingness to actually employ nuclear weapons. Indeed, it might infer that, coming at a time when combat was already under way in East Germany, such a demonstration indicated that the US was unwilling to use nuclear weapons and was trying to bluff. If they reasoned in this

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fashion, the Soviets would not feel themselves under increased pressure to reach a political settlement. Their reaction almost certainly would not go beyond an equivalent, nonhostile demonstration. They might even confine themselves to a strong propaganda attack, coupled with a public warning that, if the US went on to use these weapons, the USSR would respond in kind.

CASE B: The US uses nuclear weapons against an isolated military target outside the USSR, and announces that it has initiated the use of nuclear weapons for defensive purposes.

16. More perhaps than in any of the other assumed cases, the Soviet interpretation of such an act by the US, and the Soviet reaction to it, would depend on circumstances -- on the time and place of its occurrence, the current course of the military conflict in East Germany, the state of public opinion in the US and in the rest of the world as the Soviets assessed it, and the situation in the UN. The Soviets would surely be impressed by the fact that the US was willing to initiate the use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, depending on circumstances, the Soviets might regard the US act as no more than an attempt to intimidate, and as signifying a lack of clear policy and firm determination. Or the Soviets might take it as a solemn warning, and an indication of intent

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to expand the scale of conflict much further, if necessary. The US declaration that it had initiated the use of nuclear weapons for defensive purposes probably would not help the Soviets much in choosing between these interpretations.

17. It seems to us unlikely that the Soviets would accept a US nuclear attack on one of their aircraft, ships, or other targets outside the USSR without some military reply intended to show that as a great power they could not be treated this way with impunity. Perhaps they would seek out some similar US target and attack it with a nuclear weapon, or increase the scale of their conventional military effort in East Germany. Since the US act had small military significance, the Soviets might not think it essential to reply with nuclear weapons. We believe there is some chance that the Soviets would refrain from such a reply, in the expectation of deriving advantage from the opprobrium which would almost certainly descend upon the US on account of its initiation of nuclear warfare. Again, however, almost everything would depend upon the accompanying circumstances. We think it possible, but by no means probable, that the US act would bring the Soviets to the point of re-opening negotiations on terms giving some promise of success.

CASE C: The US makes a single nuclear attack on  
an isolated installation in the USSR, such as the

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Novaya Zemlya nuclear test site, conducted with no public announcement but accompanied by a maximum state of alert in SAC (DEFCON I).

18. The immediate Soviet reaction would depend heavily upon the state of the USSR's assessment of US military intentions. There is some chance that this action would appear to the Soviets as the beginning of a general nuclear attack. Their own military forces would be in a high state of readiness at this time, and if they did reach this conclusion, we believe that they would immediately decide to launch an all-out attack against Europe and the US.

19. If the USSR for any reason did not respond immediately, however, it would soon discover that the US attack was an isolated action. In this event, we believe that Soviet sensitivities concerning the inviolability of their territory are so intense that they would feel compelled to retaliate. Even if the US attack remained unknown to the world at large, the Soviet leaders would be determined that the main enemy should not consider that he could get away unpunished in such an act. There are a number of possible forms of Soviet retaliation, but on the whole we think the most likely would be the use of a nuclear weapon against US or NATO territory. In choosing a target for this purpose, the Soviets would probably select an isolated installation rather than a populated location.

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20. The Soviets would almost certainly conclude that the US was determined to run much greater risks of general war than they had hitherto estimated. Even so, we do not believe that they would forego an equivalent response. But, along with replying in kind, they would probably wish at this point to stop the further development of the situation by assuring that negotiations were resumed. We cannot say, however, whether they would agree to terms which were also acceptable to the West, or indeed whether any negotiating moves short of abandonment of basic positions would halt the conflict at this stage.

IV. A POSSIBLE TURNING POINT

21. The cases yet to be considered involve the use of nuclear weapons on a substantial scale and in a manner intended to have an important military effect. They involve a change in the character of the conflict, and, what may be even more important, in the attitudes of the chief contestants toward it. Once a nuclear exchange had got under way, the importance of the modalities of access to Berlin would rapidly fade, and would be seen as the occasion rather than the cause of conflict. National survival would become the central issue. The point of transformation cannot be precisely established in advance, but it can be considered as the stage at which those involved come to regard the

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struggle as the ultimate showdown between East and West. When this stage had been reached, it would become exceedingly difficult, and perhaps impossible, to stop the fighting by agreeing to negotiate about the arrangements for access to Berlin.

22. As this stage was approached, the members of NATO would focus increasingly upon the risks of general war, and would evaluate US proposals or actions almost exclusively from the standpoint of the probable Soviet response. As their assessment of the chances of general war rose, we believe that they would, virtually without exception, become increasingly insistent in urging moderation upon the US and in arguing against any further nuclear initiatives. At the same time, however, NATO governments would realize that, even if they publicly dissociated themselves from the US course of action, they would not necessarily thereby guarantee themselves immunity from Soviet attack; on the other hand they would fear that, if the crisis were surmounted without general war, they would have gravely endangered the alliance and the foundations of their defense against Soviet inroads. Thus these countries would experience extreme internal strains.

23. The Soviets too would probably come at about the same time to a similar feeling that the conflict was taking on the character of a final test. They would increasingly suspect that the US was by this

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time determined to deliver a setback so decisive as to prejudice gravely their whole future and, if they resisted, to go even further in a full effort to destroy their state and their system.

24. If the Soviets sensed that events were rapidly approaching this stage, and sensed it before an inescapable challenge to their prestige had become manifest, they would probably take what they thought were the steps necessary to move the issue from the battlefield to the conference table. In doing this, they would probably expect to reap political gains of the first magnitude in the aftermath, on the calculation that Western Europe, having recoiled from the brink of nuclear destruction, would have the greatest difficulty in bringing itself to the point of firm resistance against future Soviet demands. But tensions would be at an extreme pitch, and the Soviets might miscalculate the minimum moderation necessary to end the fighting, or they might believe that they had come to this realization too late, that the die was cast, and that their best remaining choice was to initiate general war.

25. We do not know the point at which such a change in the character of the struggle would be apparent; to some extent it would depend upon immediate and unpredictable circumstances. In the range of actions posited in this estimate, it might come with Case C, which, even though it has little military significance, is a direct nuclear attack

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upon Soviet territory. The chances that Case D, sizable nuclear attacks in East Germany, would constitute such a point of transformation are considerably greater. We believe that Case E, a large-scale attack upon the greater part of the strategic striking forces in the USSR, would carry the situation well beyond this point.

CASE D: The US uses nuclear weapons in East Germany on a militarily significant scale after the failure or impending failure of conventional efforts. For example, a small number of low-yield weapons would be used against Soviet ground forces engaged with allied forces, or the 25 major military airfields in East Germany would be subjected to nuclear attack. At the same time, SAC would assume a posture of maximum alert and readiness (DEFCON I).

26. We believe that, at this stage, the Soviets would count it as highly probable that the US was determined not to accept defeat in the local conflict. They would probably recognize that, if they responded locally with nuclear weapons, the US probably would increase its local use of the same weapons, and perhaps would react by launching a strategic attack upon the USSR. But while they would see the risks of escalation as high, they would also feel it to be well-nigh intolerable

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to allow the fighting to end at this point. Along with a move for negotiations, they would probably strike a nuclear counterblow at the Allied forces, or they might choose to strike a heavy nuclear blow at West Germany in order to underline their massive capabilities against Western Europe, hoping that the resulting panic on the continent would forestall another US counterblow. However, the USSR might at this point conclude that general war was inevitable and would therefore launch a general attack. The chance of this outcome is perhaps somewhat greater in the case of the postulated airfield attack than in the more restricted case of the use of nuclear weapons against ground troops.

27. With respect to the European allies, we doubt that any of them would approve the US action in advance or to agree to cooperate in carrying it out.

CASE E: After NATO has tried and failed to reopen air and ground access, the US seeks to destroy the USSR's entire missile and aircraft capability against Western Europe with nuclear strikes against all airfields in the Satellites containing nuclear-capable Soviet aircraft and all MRBM/IRBM bases and BADGER bases in Western USSR. A full alert of all other US forces is in effect. The US announces that

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it has made the attack, has avoided cities and minimized casualties, harbors no aggressive designs on the USSR, but will strike again if reprisals are attempted.

28. From the Soviet point of view, the action posited here, involving nuclear strikes against 100-odd targets in the USSR, would be the initiation of general nuclear war by the US. In these circumstances, it appears to us virtually certain that, as soon as the Soviet warning system could establish and report the scale of the attack being launched by the US, the Soviet leaders would order a general counterattack by their missile, ground, air, and naval forces. Even if the posited US statement of intentions was available to them prior to this decision, it would, in our view, be without effect.

29. We do not believe that any US ally would approve this course of action unless it was already convinced that general war had become inevitable. If they were so convinced, however, most of the NATO members, including the UK, France, and West Germany, would probably cooperate.

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30. In concluding, we think it important to stress that, should substantial hostilities occur over access, this would represent either a major Soviet miscalculation or a major change in Soviet intentions as we have hitherto conceived them. Whereas we presently believe that the Soviets regard the Berlin crisis as within their control, the outbreak of fighting would signify either their failure to manage events in the way they had anticipated or their willingness to accept more substantial risks than we had thought. To the uncertainties flowing from this turn of events would be added the uncertainties of a totally unprecedented situation in which the two nuclear superpowers were engaged in direct military combat.

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